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August 07, 2012

## **ECOWAS Prepares to Deploy Force to Mali**

by Peter Clotey

An official of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) says the bloc has begun a "final planning conference" to deploy a standby military force to Mali.

Communications director, Sonny Ugoh says ECOWAS also is seeking a United Nations Security Council mandate to deploy its force to deal with al-Qaida-linked Islamist militants and Tuareg separatists who have taken over the northern regions of Mali.

The ongoing one-week conference is being held in Mali's capital, Bamako.

"This planning conference is just to look at all the dimensions of the impending deployment -- look at them, evaluate them and see from the planning point of view, make sure that all the elements are included so that a report can be prepared that will now go to the committee of chiefs of defense staff," Ugoh said.

He said officials from the African Union, the European Union and the United Nations are taking part of the conference to develop ways to deal with the situation in northern Mali.

Islamist groups and Tuareg separatists seized control of northern Mali in April, taking advantage of the turmoil after renegade soldiers overthrew the government in Bamako. The militants have since taken full control of the north and imposed a strict version of Islamic law, despite protests from much of the population.

ECOWAS protocol stipulates that a standby force can be deployed after a formal request is made by a member state of the bloc. Ugoh said the bloc expects leaders in Mali to officially request deployment of a standby force.

Ugoh said ECOWAS had already asked for a U.N. Security Council mandate to allow deployment of the standby force to Mali.

"The Security Council mandate has been asking us to satisfy certain issues relating to the impending deployment, and we have been working on those. We are hoping that this time around we will be to address all the issues that will enable the Security Council respond positively to the ECOWAS request," said Ugoh.

He said the final planning conference forms part of the bloc's plans to restore constitutional order in Mali.

"We are hoping that [request] could come as quickly as possible...so that the force can be deployed," said Ugoh.

He also said that ECOWAS welcomes support from its international partners to resolve the security challenges in Mali. Ugoh adds that the bloc wants to speed up deployment so it can restore constitutional order in that country.